BUILDING COMMUNITY

Queer Space History, Part 2

BY LESLIE FREEMAN-DYKESEN

n 1985. Pearl's had seemed destined to become one in a string of short-lived gay bars in and around Burlington. Wayne Beam, who grew up in Hardwick, observed the bar scene during college vacations. At Pearl's, Beam found a claustrophobic meat market, focused on young chickens. "Out of twelve guys, if I'd go to the bathOpen Mic. But, like many 1990s grassroots efforts, queer social spaces struggled to balance optimism about cultural visibility and tolerance, with growing apathy and leadership fatigue in the wake of hard-won successes.

By 1993, the Last Elm was no longer financially viable. Though it did not dissolve formally until 1998, core members were already burned out, unable young Wayne Beam) had already been "phased out."

Increasingly, 135 Pearl focused on dance parties and drag shows, which drew larger crowds of youngish gay men and straight clubgoers. Some lesbians felt marginalized, or ghettoized in Womyn's Night. Meanwhile, the nightclub, unable to afford renovations, remained structurally inaccessible to dis/abled people.

135 Pearl - the "unity bar", as Robert Toms suggested - actively sought straight patrons. In 2003, Pearl's Rutland counterpart, Shooka Dooka's, opened to an 80 percent straight clientele. Granted access to civil unions, as well as increased access to adoption and child custody, now able to dance and drink among both neighbors and peers, LGBT Vermonters found more allies in mainstream culture than ever before Yet the most vulnerable members of LGBT communities had almost nowhere to go.

Rainbow Cattle Company, Shooka Dooka's, and 135 Pearl closed in 2006. The space that Pearl's once occupied is slated to become a Papa John's Pizzeria.

Some LGBT Vermonters view assimilation as an opportunity to be truly out, not among a protected circle of other queers, but in every aspect of their lives. They consider 135 Pearl's closing to be an opportunity to bring traditionally queer concepts of freedom and self-expression into the mainstream, and to seek out new communities that share their individual values, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Wayne Beam, who now works at Higher Ground, points to 1/2 Lounge, The Second Floor, and other Burlington area clubs. According to Beam, these clubs have successfully borrowed from the queer club scene, hosting theme nights and hiring former 135 Pearl's employees, who have helped to create an atmosphere of acceptance and safety.

'We've reached a point where people in Burlington understand that queer members of the community have a lot more to offer than being queer," Beam says.

The space that Pearl's once occupied is slated to become a Papa John's Pizzeria.

room, six would follow me in, and six would watch me go," he recalls. "It was overwhelming. It wasn't a place to connect."

When Beam returned to Burlington permanently in 1997, he discovered a dynamic queer club culture. Theatre impressario Robert Toms had bought Pearl's in 1995, and had rechristened it 135 Pearl - with a vision of genuine community and performance space for queer artists. Beam soon became an integral member of the new team; working the door, then bartending, marketing, and occasionally filling in as DJ.

135 Pearl joined a network of social spaces, influenced by alternative lifestyle communities and the queer nightlife of urban centers such as Montreal and Boston, but geared toward a smaller, geographically disparate population. This network extended from the Rainbow Cattle Company in Brattleboro to 135 Pearl.

It was supported by communities challenged by new restrictions on outdoor cruising, inspired by social change movements, and energized by national activism around HIV/ AIDS and multicultural feminism. In 1990, it had included the Last Elm Cafe, a collective coffeehouse of queer and straight allies. Located deep in Burlington's Old North End, the Last Elm had provided lively art and music, a cheap bottomless

to market the cafe to a mainstream youth culture. In this context, 135 Pearl struggled to be simultaneously socially conscious, culturally relevant, and

Burlington musician Steph Pappas had grown accustomed to carving out queer space within straight bars, and lesbian space within queer spaces dominated by gay men. Pappas remembers 135 Pearl's crucial role in promoting and supporting her talent.

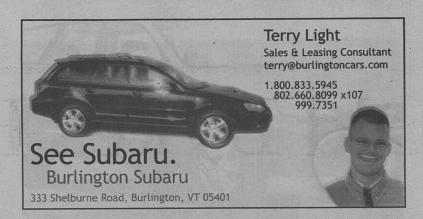
Her all-girl rock band Miss Bliss played their first gig there, under the name Toxic Shock. 135 Pearl continued to be open to Pappas' shows, from Miss Bliss to the experimental Steph Pappas Experience.

Pappas also found a niche in the crowd at Womyn's Nights, where "music spun by a woman DJ was always the staple .. as well as catered food by a woman-owned business." But, she adds, "Women would leave by 11pm because the gay men would come around.'

Eventually, the Womyn's Night concept became house music provided by a male DJ to a woman-identified audience.

Pappas highlights a persistent dilemma for 135 Pearl: how to welcome diverse identities, yet facilitate belonging for each group, and make money. Tracy, a former Pearl's bartender, points out that older men (presumably the regulars who had alienated

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Thank you to all who nurtured and developed the paper over the years. **OITM** helped establish a healthy, vibrant LGBT community in Vermont that has led the nation in emerging social issues. The paper has been the through line to all our community has accomplished. Its presence will be sorely missed.

-- the Board of Directors of the Gay & Lesbian Fund of VT